



Records of the Poor in England

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Many of us have ancestors who were at one time considered poor or paupers. Records of the poor of England, created by church and government institutions, can reveal fascinating details about the lives of your ancestors.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE POOR

- Prior to the establishment of the Church of England, much of the responsibility for the care of the poor rested with the Catholic monasteries.
- The Church of England was established in 1531 and the monasteries were dissolved in 1536-9.
- Care of the poor now rested with the Church of England parishes and their churchwardens.
- Relief was mostly considered "Outdoor" relief from 1600 to 1800. This was relief outside of a workhouse.
- In 1834 care for the poor was transferred from the parishes to poor law unions, set up by the government.

GOVERNMENT ACTS

Through the centuries, numerous Parliamentary Acts were passed to help deal with the poor. These are some of the key ones:

- 1564 – Aimed to suppress beggars
- 1572 – Every parish appoints Overseers of Poor
- 1601 – Most comprehensive & significant act
 - Overseers elected (2-4) to serve with churchwardens
 - Rates assessed to householders & landowners
 - Families: 1st source of assistance; Parish: 2nd source
 - Stock (flax, wool, thread, et c.) purchased to provide work for poor
 - Names of those receiving relief to be recorded
 - Pauper children to be bound out as apprentices
 - Buildings to house poor built on waste land
- 1662 – Settlement Act: removal of newcomers ("likely to be chargeable") to poor rates
- 1697 – Newcomers: carry certificates of settlement from parish of legal residence; Poor to wear a 'P' for identification
- 1723 – Workhouses could be established
- 1733 – Women forced to declare father of illegitimate child; father charged with care
 - Bonds of Indemnity "Bastardy Bonds"
- 1744 – Legal settlement of child to be same as mother (not parish of birth)

- 1782 – Parishes grouped into unions
- 1795 – No one could be removed from parish unless healthy and applied for relief
 - Some parishes used rates to assist poor to emigrate

PARISH CHEST RECORDS

Some records relating to the poor at the parish level are part of what are known as “parish chest” records. These are:

- Part of secular records of the parish
- Kept in the parish chest
- Types of records include:
 - Minutes and accounts of Overseers
 - Receipts and disbursements of funds
 - Settlement and bastardy examinations
 - Settlement certificates & removal orders
 - Registers of apprentices & indentures
 - Workhouse admissions & discharges
 - Emigration lists

QUARTER SESSION RECORDS

When matters, especially criminal ones, could not be handled by the parishes, they were referred to the county court known as Quarter Sessions – held quarterly

- These include:
 - Runaway fathers/apprentices
 - Applications for a child’s maintenance
 - Disputes over legal settlement
 - Convict transportation orders
 - Accounts of charities and lunatics
 - Insolvent debtors
- Some Quarter Sessions records have been transcribed, published, and/or indexed

THE NEW POOR LAW ACT OF 1834

- Background:
 - Growing unrest among poor
 - Riots & attacks on poorhouses
 - 1832: government appointed Royal Commission
- Poor Law Unions were instituted
- Each union was made up of several parishes
- Boards of Guardians were appointed/elected
- Each Union built a workhouse
- Classes of the poor included:
 - Sick, aged, and infirm
 - Orphans and foundlings
 - Lunatics
 - Widowed and deserted wives
 - School attendees
 - Unemployed able-bodied

- Destitute paupers (the deserving poor)
- Vagrants (the delinquent poor)
- Commission's Philosophy:
 - Devised simple way to eradicate pauperism (with minimum cost & bureaucratic intervention)
 - Compel indigent to reform (avoid living conditions in workhouse)
 - conditions deliberately worse than lowest class
 - have paupers feel like unwelcome guests
 - Outdoor relief phased out within two years
- Types of available records:
 - Minutes and accounts
 - Records of expenditures
 - Records of admissions and discharges
 - Lists of inmates
 - Registers of births, baptisms, deaths and burials
 - Registers of apprentices and indentures
 - Registers of creed
 - Records of families assisted to emigrate
 - Medical records

THE UNION WORKHOUSE

- 1723 - The Workhouse Act: could be established by parishes if needed
- Large cities (with more than one parish) allowed to build; also known as poorhouse
- Intended for the sick, the elderly and orphans
- Conditions in the workhouse would act as a deterrent to 'the idle poor'; relief was only available to those desperate enough to seek it

FINDING THE RECORDS

- In Parish Chest Records
- Deposited at county record offices
- www.genuki.org.uk
- Search FamilySearch Catalog at www.familysearch.org > Place-names Search > "Church Records" or "Poorhouses, poor law, etc."
- www.workhouses.org.uk
- Increasingly, digitized images, transcriptions and indexes are appearing online.

SUMMARY

- Pre-1834: look in parish records for the poor
- Post-1834: look at union workhouse records
- Survival & contents of records varies widely
- Always search internet for digitized records/indexes/transcripts
- Need for workhouses mostly removed in 1908 with establishment of old age pensions & in 1911 with unemployment insurance
- Workhouses were finally abolished in 1948

FOR FURTHER READING

- *Annals of the Poor* by Eve McLaughlin, FHL book 942 H6mer
- *The Effects of the New Poor Law* by Jean A. Cole, FHL book 942 P3cj
- *The Parish Chest* by W. E. Tate, FHL book 942 K2t
- *Poor Law Union Records* by J.S.W. Gibson, FHL book 942 P37gj – in four parts
 - Each part covers the existence of records in a different region of England
- Chapter 18 of *Ancestral Trails* by Mark D. Herber, FHL book 942 D27hm

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